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ABSTRACT

A survey conducted in a large, predominantly white suburban high school in the midwest investigated student attitudes toward study of Russian and other foreign languages. Respondents were 815 students of Spanish, French, German, Japanese, and Latin at three levels of instruction. Students were first asked to rank the reasons they chose the language they were studying, then to indicate their level of satisfaction with that choice. Finally, they were asked to rank the reasons they did not choose to study Russian. Analysis focuses on responses to the last question. Most common reasons for not studying Russian included perceptions of its academic difficulty, lack of interest in the culture, interest in pursuing languages begun in middle school, and lack of job or career potential associated with Russian study. It is concluded that: students choose their languages to satisfy future college requirements; parents, friends, and siblings have tremendous influence on the foreign language chosen, while counselor influence is minimal; students study languages with cultures that interest them; and students are generally satisfied with their language choices. Considerations and recommendations for secondary school Russian language program development, based on these findings, are outlined. (MSE)

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Why Don't Students Study Russian?

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Why Don't Students Study Russian?

Abstract

In a high school where six foreign languages are offered, 815 students explain why they did not choose Russian. Students at Valley High School in West Des Moines, Iowa were asked to explain why they chose their current foreign language of study, how satisfied they were with the chosen language, and why they did not choose to study Russian. The results of this survey, conducted at the end of the spring semester of the 1992-93 school year, both reinforce long held beliefs about student attitudes towards the study of Russian and shed light on new issues which can be addressed to increase interest and enrollments in the secondary Russian language classroom. This article reflects attitudes expressed by students in a large (2,300 student enrollment), predominately white, suburban high school. The author challenges the reader to consider the points made as they relate to his or her own teaching environment. In addition, questions and comments on the details of this survey and its findings are invited to aid in its design for a more broad study of student attitudes towards studying foreign languages. The author may be contacted via the address listed in the most current ACTR membership directory.

Answering a Different Question

Teachers of Russian are often asked the question "Why study Russian?" by the parents of prospective students, school administrators, and members of the community involved in making decisions concerning the school's curriculum. The teacher of Russian is not empowered by the answers to this question. That is, rarely does the teacher fully control why students choose to study Russian. Answering the question "Why study Russian?" does not present solutions for building strong Russian language programs, nor does it explain why a Russian language program is weak and suffers low enrollments. Answering the question "Why *don't students* study Russian?" begins the empowerment process by indicating areas which can be controlled or acted on to increase student interest and enrollment.

High enrollments are stressed as an indicator for a secondary Russian language program's success, because it is often the main criteria for continued existence of the program. Faced with tight budgets and high enrollment in core courses, Russian language programs suffering low enrollment face combined levels and/or termination when placed on a school board's chopping block. A case in point is the Russian language program at Prospect High School in Mt. Prospect, Illinois. The Russian language program existed for 27 years, produced several regional finalists in the Olympiada of spoken Russian, and had an enrollment of approximately 60 students over four levels of instruction during the 1992-93 school year. In a passionate scene, familiar to any instructor fighting for the existence of an educational program,

students of Russian and their parents petitioned for the reversal of a decision to terminate the school's Russian language program at a spring school board meeting. But the decision held for two reasons: low enrollments and the financial cost of supporting a small number of students. It may be argued that the academic quality of a Russian language program is as much related to its success as are high enrollments. To a degree this may be true, but if a program of high instructional quality *is* to exist at the secondary level, then a prerequisite is the high enrollments which will *allow* for its existence. While a Russian language program of low academic quality with high enrollments will tend to remain in a secondary school's curriculum, a program of high academic quality with low enrollments will not.

About the Survey

This survey was meant to answer the question "Why don't students study Russian?" for the reasons mentioned above. In addition, why students were attracted to other foreign languages was also examined as a means to compare what was lacking in the Russian language program. The survey was administered to 815 secondary students of Spanish, French, German, Japanese, and Latin from levels I, II, and III of instruction at Valley High School. The survey was divided into three parts. Students were first asked to rank the reasons why they chose the foreign language they were currently studying. Choices selected to be included on the survey were based on suggestions from discussions with the members of the school's foreign language department. An option "other" was

provided with space for writing and ranking additional responses. The results of this first portion of the survey are summarized in table 1. In the second part of the survey students were asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with their choice in foreign language. The results of the second portion of the survey are summarized in table 2. In the third part of the survey students were asked to rank the reasons why they did not chose to study Russian. The results of this third portion of the survey are summarized in table 3.

Table 1

Reasons for choosing L2	1st choice	2nd choice	3rd choice
Satisfy future college requirements	39%	18%	15%
Advice from others	15	27	19
" parents	(35%)	(39%)	(40%)
" friends	(30%)	(25%)	(30%)
" siblings	(26%)	(20%)	(18%)
" counselors	(8%)	(16%)	(13%)
Interest in the culture of the L2	12	14	18
Future job/career related to language	9	9	12
Positive experience w/ native speaker of the language, travel to country	8	10	11
Other	6	3	2
The language would not be academically difficult	5	10	10
The language is academically challenging	3	6	8
Undecided	2	2	3
Specific teacher's reputation at the high school	.4	1	2

Table 3

Reasons for not choosing Russian	1stchoice	2nd choice	3rd choice
The language is too academically difficult	34%	16%	16%
No interest in the culture of L2	24	28	15
Other*	14	3	2
No future job/career potential related to language	12	24	26
No positive experience w/ native speakers of L2, no travel to the country	5	15	22
Undecided	5	4	5
Advice from others	4	10	12
" parents	(48%)	(28%)	(34%)
" friends	(24%)	(22%)	(45%)
" siblings	(14%)	(19%)	(11%)
" counselors	(14%)	(21%)	(9%)
Not academically challenging	1	1	1
Specific teacher's reputation at the high school	.3	1	1

*74 of the 107 students of Spanish and French (the most populous languages), responding to "other" as their first choice, wrote remarks in the space provided. Of these 74 remarks, 49% stated that they wanted to continue their study of French or Spanish from junior high (8th grade).

Table 2

How would you rate your satisfaction with the foreign language you are currently studying?	**Percent**
Very satisfied. I plan to study this language after graduation	11%
Very satisfied	25
Satisfied	39
Somewhat satisfied. Indifferent.	20
Very dissatisfied.	2
Very dissatisfied. I will not continue study of the language	2

Implications for Secondary School Russian Language Programs: Why Students Do Not Choose Russian

1) Russian is too academically difficult.

This response ranked first in the "first choice" category and third in the "second choice" and "third choice categories" (see Table 3). Russian language instructors tend to respond to feedback that their subject is too academically difficult with answers centered on one of two academic philosophies: a philosophy of **exclusivity** or a philosophy of **accessibility** (Watzke 1992). A philosophy of exclusivity recognizes that Russian is a highly inflected language which requires a longer amount of time to reach high levels of proficiency than when studying a cognate language (French, Spanish, or German). The difficulty of the

language requires that the learner be hard-working, diligent, and of high academic caliber. High attrition rates and low enrollments due to the high degree of difficulty of the Russian language are a normal phenomenon because students are expected to work harder to achieve the same grades in Russian as their peers studying cognate languages. An instructor of Russian who has adopted this philosophy would tend to agree with the statement that Russian is academically difficult.

A philosophy of accessibility also recognizes that Russian is a highly inflected language which requires a longer amount of time to reach high levels of proficiency than when studying a cognate language, but does not penalize students academically because of this. An instructor who has adopted this philosophy denies no student the opportunity to study Russian because students are not penalized academically for their choice in languages. Students who study Russian are not required to work harder than their peers who study cognate languages to achieve the same grades. An instructor who has adopted the philosophy of accessibility would not agree with the statement that Russian is academically difficult. Instead, he or she would consider ways to change students attitudes towards the language.

One way of changing students' attitudes might be the development of before- or after-school, and summer elementary school language programs. These initiatives would allow students early academic exposure to the Russian language. Middle school language programs, as well as visitation programs from upper level secondary school students would expose students early to the

language and culture and allow them to speak to experienced students about the difficulty of the language.

Accessibility would most certainly produce more students of Russian and promote a more diverse student population within the Russian language classroom. In addition, these students would have experienced methods such as cooperative learning, peer teaching, and concept attainment strategies which promote learning through the interaction of stronger and weaker students and a deeper understanding of the rules. Most importantly, accessibility allows for action to be taken on the feedback mentioned above, while exclusivity does not. Other ways to decrease the stigma of difficulty attached to the Russian language will be mentioned below.

2) No interest in the culture of the Russian language.

This response ranked second in the "first choice" category, first in the "second choice" category, and fourth in the "third choice" category (see Table 3). **Students lack positive experiences with native speakers of Russian and Russian culture.** This similar response ranked fifth in the "first choice" category, fourth in the "second choice" category, and second in the "third choice" category (see Table 3).

American popular culture and media provide the Russian language instructor with few positive images and impressions of Russian culture. The high percentage of response indicated in this survey suggests that appealing to high school students' tastes in culture will not lead to higher enrollments or interest in the Russian language. On the contrary, it indicates that what

is exotic and different about the Russian language and culture drives more students away from the study of the language than it attracts.

American popular culture rarely reinforces positive ***or*** negative impressions of Russia. Instead, Russian culture tends to be ignored or summed up in repetitive sound or image bytes (St. Basil's Cathedral, borsch, matryoshkas, vodka, the KGB, shabkas). An American teenager would hardly mention borsch and piroshki as their favorite ethnic food. Instead, he or she would prefer Mexican-American, Italian, Chinese, Japanese, etc..

The American media is a mixed bag of positive and negative images and impressions. While Russia is often portrayed as an emerging third world country, it is also shown to be a country of and for mavericks willing to take risks and invest in a nation of great potential. Recent agreements for joint U.S.-Russian space and energy exploration and the increase in successful business ventures are positive signs of the increase in need for speakers of the Russian language.

How does a Russian language instructor act on the feedback that their is little interest in the culture of Russia? One way is for the teacher of Russian to begin taking small steps to bring the culture into the lives of secondary and middle school students. Community "experts" who have had contacts with Russia, such as people involved in business, representatives of community groups, and university instructors of Russian, History, and Art, can be invited into the school's art, history, economics, world politics, and Russian language classes. By arranging for these

experts to visit other subject classes, students begin to sense the importance of Russian in the world, as opposed to Russian as simply a subject to be studied. It is especially important to include middle school students in this process because, ultimately, their enrollments in the secondary Russian language program will build the backbone for a strong program. Supplemental visits by third and fourth year Russian language students to the middle schools and elementary schools should also be considered. These visits can be designed in a short language and culture practicum format, which supplements specific units of the middle and elementary school teacher's curriculum. Within the secondary school, Russian language instructors can take the initiative to create interdisciplinary projects or units which encompass elements of the Russian language program and other school subjects (such as those mentioned above). In these interdisciplinary projects Russian becomes part of a larger curriculum goal and establishes itself outside the subject of "Russian language" and, in this way, reaches larger numbers of students and potential future students. Many of the suggestions mentioned above are time consuming endeavors. It should be stressed that projects with other teachers, summer curriculum projects, and school district incentive awards are avenues for the distribution of time and compensation for the instructor's efforts.

3) Students continue to study foreign languages offered first in the middle school.

This response was represented by "Other" in the "first choice" category where it ranked third (see Table 3). For Russian language instructors who teach in a school district where languages other than Russian are offered in the middle school, this has great significance. The high response to this item indicates that the study of Russian is passed up by many students because the choice to study it was not offered earlier in the middle school (In the case of the survey only Spanish and French are offered in the middle schools, but six languages are offered in the high school). When languages other than Russian are offered earlier in the middle school, a need is promoted for those languages later in the high school. Students are reluctant to switch to a different language once they have begun the study of another. This situation should be viewed by the Russian language instructor as a form of recruitment which creates, in part, an artificial need for those foreign languages offered in the middle school. While this is by no means the only reason students continue the study of the same language from middle to high school, this situation should be pointed out to school district officials reluctant to support efforts by the Russian language instructor to reach out to the middle school (such as those efforts suggested under point two). The survey also suggests that programs, in which elementary and middle school students are exposed to all potential foreign languages offered in the secondary school, are more fair to students and foreign language

teachers. In this way, students are not pushed to choose any one foreign language earlier until all can be included in the decision.

The fact that languages other than Russian are often offered prior to the secondary level is a powerful recruitment tool for these languages. It is important for the Russian language instructor to recognize this and make the school administration aware of this. This is perhaps the strongest argument for support in efforts to bring the Russian language and culture to the elementary and middle school levels.

4) There is no future job/career potential related to studying the Russian language.

This response ranked fourth in the "first choice" category, third in the "second choice" category, and first in the "third choice" category (see Table 3). The high response to this statement is interesting when considering that the source of this attitude may not be the students themselves. Parents' attitudes towards foreign languages often have a strong influence on whether students choose to study them (see Table 2). But in the parents life-time, the study of Russian and, more relevant to this response item, the chances for employment associated with Russia and the Russian language were rather few in comparison with the opportunities in the present. I again point to the recent agreements between the U.S. and Russian governments for joint space and energy exploration and trade. These efforts and agreements are unprecedented in the history of our two nations.

The attitude that there are few employment opportunities for students of Russian is both outdated and untrue.

To act on this response is not an easy task when it means changing the attitudes of both students and their parents. Under point two of this section, I suggested calling on community "experts" to help spread the word about Russian as it relates to a variety of fields. In the next section I will list several suggestions which relate specifically to the parents of students.

Implications for Secondary School Russian Language Programs: Why Students Choose Foreign Languages

1) Secondary school students choose to study foreign languages to satisfy future college requirements.

This response ranked first in the "first choice" category and second in both the "second choice" and "third choice" categories (see Table 1). The very high response to this statement is important for two reasons. First, regardless of language, students tend to choose to study foreign languages because of future academic requirements (Many four year colleges require the study of a foreign language as part of their core requirements). For the instructor of a foreign language, this is a very unromantic response to a field which holds many possibilities for the student. But positive or negative, requirements tend to push high school students to study foreign languages early rather than face studying them later at the college level. As rising

secondary foreign language enrollments indicate, students are choosing to fulfill the requirement while they are in high school.

Second, the high response to this statement, when coupled with the perceived difficulty of the Russian language, means that students are not choosing to study Russian because it is perceived as a more difficult way for them to satisfy foreign language requirements. This is practical reasoning on the side of the students. Potentially, a high school student may study up to seven or eight subjects in a single day. The student may consider many of these subjects, such as math and science, of higher priority than Russian because they are directly tested on college entrance exams (such as the ACT or SAT). Foreign language instructors will argue that the study of languages promotes higher level thinking skills which can be applied to other subjects and college entrance exams. However, this reasoning is not in tune with the way students understand pre-college curriculum goals. The argument for earlier satisfaction of college foreign language requirements will bring more students into the high school foreign language classroom.

The secondary Russian language instructor shares much in common with instructors of other foreign languages based on this response. By knowing that many students are choosing to study foreign languages because of practical reasons, it would be wise to design a Russian language curriculum which responds to this. Earlier, two philosophies of the teaching of Russian, academic exclusivity and accessibility, were discussed. Again, academic accessibility, the philosophy of teaching Russian which includes

students of all academic abilities, can be responsive to the reasons why students choose to study foreign languages. It would make sense, then, for the Russian language instructor to consult the instructors of the languages with the highest enrollments and discuss what can be done during curriculum design to ensure opportunities for all students to study Russian. Another response, related to accessibility, is to work towards a curriculum design that ensures that students are not academically penalized for their choice to study Russian.

2) Parents, friends, and siblings have tremendous influence on which foreign language a student chooses, while the influence of counselors is minimal.

This response ranked second in the "first choice" category and first in both the "second choice" and "third choice" categories (see Table 1). It is interesting to note that this statement drew the highest response from students over their first three choices collectively. This indicates that parents, friends and siblings have the biggest influence over the choices students make in foreign languages, while the influence of school counselors is very low. This may come as a surprise to many teachers of Russian, but it should not. Counselors, of the four groups mentioned having influence on students' choices, are the most accessible group for the teacher of Russian to reach out to for help in changing student attitudes towards the perceived difficulty of the language. But, the impact counselors have on these choices hardly merits blaming them when a program is weak. When a secondary Russian language instructor is prone to

complaining about school counselors as a negative influence on enrollment growth, he or she should consider two questions. First, has the teacher of Russian made a commitment to annually sitting down, face to face, with each middle and secondary school counselor to discuss the language program and the need for all types of students in the program? And second, are the counselors simply doing their jobs by advising average and weak students against the study of Russian because the school's Russian language program *does* penalize these students for having chosen to study Russian? School counselors should not be blamed for advising students. That is their job. But secondary teachers of Russian should be blamed when they fail to advise counselors of the type of program offered and the demands the curriculum places on its students.

The parents of potential students are the most difficult group to reach in efforts to change students attitudes towards the study of Russian. While friends and counselors of students can be reached in the school building, parents cannot. It is also unlikely that students' parents have studied Russian in their own schooling. And, the thought that many of today's parents may still hold cold war attitudes towards Russia characterizes parents as those who give their sons and daughter advice about the study of Russian when, in fact, they know very little about the topic. But, if secondary school Russian language programs hope to increase enrollments, it is clear that parents must be included, first and foremost, in efforts to inform students of their choices in languages. Parents must be educated because they will have

more influence on a student's choice in foreign language study than any other group of people. This reaching out to parents can be done in a variety of ways. Depending on the support of the school district administration, fliers can be sent to parents of prospective students or distributed by counselors. These fliers may include information on the benefits of the study of Russian as a distinguishing feature on future college applications, answer questions about the difficulty of the language, include information about school exchange or travel initiatives, and the phone number of the teacher or counselors for parents who have questions. Another way of reaching parents is to ask to speak or make presentations where parents of students meet, such as at parent-teacher support groups or PTA's and school orientation programs.

Ultimately, there are many factors which influence a student's decision to study a foreign language. The influence of the student's parents plays a large role in this decision, but they represent a group which is less readily available to the teacher of Russian because of their lack of presence in the building and their sheer size in numbers. Working with school counselors and administrators to reach parents and distribute information to them will establish a link which is vital to the growth of the Russian language program.

3) Secondary students choose to study those foreign languages with cultures that interest them.

This response ranked third in both the "first choice" and "second choice" categories and second in the "third choice"

category (see Table 1). The idea that interest in the culture of a foreign language attracts students towards the study of that language makes sense. But what constitutes a student's "interest" can be debated. By "interest" students may simply be indicating that they are more familiar with the culture of a language. It is this familiarity, I propose, to which students were answering in the survey. This is indicated by the relatively low or neutral response to the statement "Positive experience with native speaker of the language, travel to the country" when students were indicating why they chose their present language of study (see Table 1). If this is true, then what is exotic (intriguingly different) and different (unfamiliar) about Russian culture drives more students away than it attracts to the study of the language.

Interestingly, studies conducted by the University of Iowa Critical Languages Program of Iowa secondary school students studying Russian, Chinese, and Japanese found that students who study less commonly taught languages often state the opposite. The different and exotic elements of these languages make them more attractive to students.

An answer to the two conflicting attitudes toward culture can be explained by lower enrollments in less commonly taught languages. While the unfamiliarity of the Russian culture does attract some students who wish to study a more *exotic* culture, the *differences* still act to drive away many more students. By bringing the Russian culture to students earlier in the elementary and middle schools, the culture will become more familiar and, hopefully, more interesting. At the same time, low exposure in

media coverage and popular American culture, as mentioned earlier, will still keep an element of uniqueness to the culture to appeal to students wishing to study something more exotic. In this way, Russian can appeal to students with a variety of motivations and interests.

4) Secondary students are satisfied with their choices in foreign languages.

Out of 815 students surveyed, 75 % responded that they were either satisfied (39%), very satisfied (25%), or very satisfied and planned to continue study of the foreign language in college (11%) (see Table 2). This very high rate of satisfaction indicates that the process students use in choosing to study foreign languages works well for them and holds true to their needs. It is the role of the secondary Russian language instructor to consider this process students use for choosing languages and the needs of students in their teaching environment and, then, to consider ways in which the Russian language curriculum can meet these needs. This is not an easy task.

Conclusion

The focus of this survey and article has been on the secondary student of Russian prior to his or her study of the language. The suggestions and conclusions drawn from this survey focus primarily on initiatives which promote the study of Russian and invite all types of students to study the language. Below is a summary of considerations and suggestions for secondary Russian language program development based on the findings of the survey.

·Parents of potential students must be included in efforts to increase the awareness of the Russian language program.

·Elementary and middle school foreign language programs must include Russian if programs for other foreign languages exist.

·A philosophy of academic accessibility must drive the Russian language curriculum. Only then will the language program be truly open to all students.

·Community experts and advanced Russian language students must visit the middle and elementary schools to promote interest in the culture and answer students' questions about the difficulty of the study of Russian.

·Support from the district and school administration must be stated explicitly in support of the teacher of Russian's efforts.

·Russian must be presented to potential students as a worthwhile way for the satisfaction of future foreign language requirements, the way to a future career, and a subject which is not unfairly demanding.

The question was posed "Why don't students study Russian?" In answering this question, students have revealed reasons why they choose foreign languages and their implications for the secondary teacher of Russian. The answers to this question enable the teacher of Russian to begin the process of reexamining his or her Russian language program for possible changes which will better represent the language to potential students.

It is suggested that, during this reexamination process, all points brought to light in this article be considered as they relate to the language program. This holistic approach makes full use of the potential resources in the school and community when considering initiatives for the Russian language program.

Lastly, the questions, conclusions, and suggestions proposed in this article should serve to promote the discussion of the development of secondary Russian language programs among teachers of Russian. It is hoped that this survey will serves as a basis for the beginning of this discussion.

John Watzke is a graduate student in the College of Education, Division of Curriculum and Instruction, at the University of Iowa. He formerly taught Russian at the secondary school level as a participant in the Iowa Critical Languages Program.

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